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Interview with Mildred Griffith

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Mildred Griffith

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CHAPTER II: MILDRED GRIFFITH AND EDUCATION

Curriculum

Mildred Griffith began her schooling at Moundview School by teaching all of the subjects that we teach today. But, in addition to the usual rudiments she provided free piano lessons, cut fingernails, toenails, and washed and cut hair when there was a need. Because there was no formal physical education class, she provided an extra long noon hour so that all of her students could divide into teams and play ball under the leadership of the older boys. When the weather did not allow for the ball games, there were plenty of board games in the building to fill the time. The length of the typical school day lasted from 8:30-4:00 for all of eight months, and any days that were missed were made up. As a rule, the country school followed the same schedule as the town school. Griffith's board of education was very gracious in providing for the curricular needs of the students at Moundview School. They had current maps, and after the installation of electricity they had "everything", including a movie camera.

The typical school day found a class president and monitors hard at work. Since instruction took place with different levels at different times, one older child read to the younger ones while the teacher taught math or another subject with the other children. She would teach math, social studies, health and science on one level one year and on the next level the next year. She knew that the kids would get it after hearing it so

many times.

The daily program as documented in the teachers first week's report to district clerk and county superintendent in 1950 began at nine o'clock with opening exercises that included the flag salute, singing, news, etc.. At nine fifteen every day there were readings until ten thirty. At this time the students and the teacher had earned a fifteen minute recess for supervised play. At ten forty five the solids of arithmetic, English, spelling, and writing were taught until noon. After lunch and play for one hour, the students began literature study for thirty minutes and social studies for one hour. The social studies curriculum included history, geography, science, civil government, health, and Kansas geography. By two thirty they had earned another supervised play time for fifteen minutes. Art and music ended the day with dismissal at four o'clock. The art curriculum was correlated with the social studies curriculum.

To test the curriculum of the school, a county wide test was given at the court house to all students who planned to graduate from the eighth grade . On these days she would cancel school and make it up on Saturday so that she could go with the children. This gave her the opportunity to answer any questions they might have during the test recesses and to keep them calm from test anxiety. Students whose parents had concerns about their readiness for the next grade were always encouraged to promote the

student with the understanding that deficits would be made up the next year.

To complement the school curriculum, the teacher was responsible for several special programs through out the year. She had Christmas and spring musicals, complete with a program handout. The program responsibility fell solely on the shoulders of the teacher and the students. The Moundview Christmas program was held on December 23rd in 1957. It started with a welcome by the teacher and then a processional of students onto the stage in the front of the room. A short play called "Amiel's Gift" was followed by a scripture reading. The recessional and invocation provided transition between the first and second plays. There were two piano solos, a reading, and even a time for volunteers to play the piano during the program. Again there were two more plays and then the program closed with the students and audience singing "Silent Night", "Jolly Old St. Nicholas", and "Merry Christmas". The program covers were decorated with glitter of green and red.

The State complemented the curriculum by supplying reading materials to the rural schools through the Book of the Month Program. In this program the teacher would receive sixteen books each month whose origin was Topeka, Kansas. She would keep the books for use in the building for the month then send them to the next school on the circulation list. This traveling library, however, was not the only source of extra

reading material for the school. The county superintendent, Miss Granger, possessed a holding of books which she allowed the teachers to check out for limited periods of time. The school also had a small library which contained two current sets of encyclopedias and 388 volumes in 1953. That year seventy three books were added to the collection with twenty two coming from the Reading-Circle list approved by the State Superintendent.

Textbooks choices in the one-room school were mandated by the State at this time. The State adopted textbook series in math, social studies, health, science, spelling, and writing. The local boards of education were not given the choice to change the texts in their district.

Students

Student expectations were very similar to today. Children started school at age five. The furthest that any of her children traveled to school was five and one half miles. The school covered grades one to grade eight, but Griffith referred to the first graders as her kindergarten. She is proud of the fact that many of her former students attended college and were teachers.

The grading system went through a change in format under the guidance of Griffith. As documented in the teacher's monthly report to county superintendent form for 1951 the twenty two students received grades of Op, U, S-, S, and S+. Two years later Griffith was still using the

S,U grading system for music, and art, but used the F, D, C, B, A system with pluses and minuses in history, geography, reading, writing, spelling, English, health, and mathematics.

Student's appearance was a high expectation. The girls all wore cotton print dresses or skirts with a blouse, unless they were playing on the ball team. The school's ball uniforms were tee shirts with the word MOUNDVIEW written across the chest, and long pants. The boys all wore shirts and pants or jeans. The student's hair was nicely kept. Girls typically wore shoulder length styles that were either curly or straight. The boy's hair was very short and parted on one side if possible.

The general health of the students was documented on the teacher's report at the close of the school year. The report on students' health spreadsheet contained spaces for the usual items such as age, which ranged from age six to fourteen in 1953. The eighteen students were weighed and measured at the beginning of the year and again at the end of the year and their weights and heights were listed. One boy, the oldest in the school went from 134 pounds at the start to 150 by April and gained an inch in height. Other items that were filled out included whether they still had their adenoids and tonsils. Their general physical condition and posture was given on all but two of the students but no explanation was given for the criteria. Right and or left vision was marked on every student. Many of them wore glasses that were either horn rimmed or wire

rimmed styles.

The April, 1953 term report listed the number of students enrolled at each grade by gender. There was only one female in first grade and no students in second. Third grade contained two of each gender, and again there was only one female in fourth. The largest class in 1953 was the fifth grade with three males and four females. There were no sixth graders, and one boy and girl in seventh. The eighth grade was another large class with three males and one female. The chart broke the school down into eight white males and ten white females.

Attendance was another documented item for the teacher to track. Out of the 156 days that school was in session, the average daily attendance for the eight boys was seven point eight, and average for the ten girls was nine point three. On the 1951 March teacher's monthly report to the county superintendent, Griffith notes that the absences are a result of the measles. Ten of the twenty two students had missed a week or more of school. On the same form she comments to Miss Granger that the state inspector, Mr. Cook from Topeka visited them.

There were exceptions to the typical student in the rural school. One boy with a brilliant mind, whose mother did not want him to go to high school in town was fortunate to have Griffith for a teacher. She would bring high school books from town and instruct him as far as she could in the basics. In return he helped her on the playground and with instruction.

This student later had three children of his own and all of them completed college degrees. Even today, when he sees her in public he thanks her for encouraging him to continue his studying.

School District and Community

School district number 81 was created on 27 February, 1946 by a committee made up of Wallace Kobs, J.D. Golliher, R.D. Cole, L.L. Meng, and Carl Evans. This Meade County School Reorganization Committee disorganized common school districts numbered 3, 28, 42, and 77 to create a new district number 81. The legal description of the new district was as follows:

1. All the territory now contained in district number 42 in Meade County, Kansas.
2. Such portions of territory in the following districts in township 32 south, range 27 west of the 6th P.M.

- (1) In district number 3

- The southwest quarter of section 23

- (2) In district number 28

- The south half of section 13

- The south half of section 14

- The southwest quarter of section 17

- The south half of section 18

This reorganization amended the final order of reorganization of this

committee that was made on 5 January 1946 that created school district number 77. No explanation is given for the rehearing except to say that parties made application for it.

There were fifteen families in district 81. These families transported their families to school without busses. Toward the end of the existence of the school, parents could turn in claims for transportation reimbursement, but most did not. For the most part the parents brought their own students, but some would take turns picking up the neighbors and bringing them home. Sometimes the boys would ride their horses to school. On those days there would be a row a horses tied outside the school.

As with most public buildings there were other uses for the school than the education of the area youth. Voting in elections was held in the school and some Sunday meetings as well.

The school did not have a formal parents organization such as a PTA. Griffith filled the need by involving them all in a wide variety of activities during the school year. One year, all of the rural schools would arrange to meet in Fowler for the county musical, and the next year they would meet in Meade. The parents were also included in the annual track day at the school. The local board of education was responsible for the filling of teacher vacancies and for creating vacancies in their specific district school when the need arose. The year before Griffith arrived at

Moundview school, two teachers did not last to fulfill their contracts because the students were so unruly. The boundaries of the schools jurisdiction was a six mile radius, or twenty four square miles. There was no school choice, if you lived in that radius you attended Moundview school.

Finance

The finance of a rural school was much simpler than today. The per pupil expenditure was about \$750.00 to \$1,000.00, and the land that the school was built on was donated for that purpose. After the school was closed in 1958, the land went back to the donor. Griffith's salary for one years service was \$3800.00, the highest in the county. One reason for this is the fact that she was one of the few who held a college degree. Most of the rural school teachers in the county remarkably did not graduate from a college. She did have input into the salary decision. The check came out once a month and was brought to the school by the chairman of the board.

Teacher Expectations and Discipline

Teacher expectations as you would imagine were high in the small rural school district. Teachers were expected to conduct themselves well in public and Griffith was no exception. She always wanted to be a good example for her students and the community. Discipline was strict but fair in the Moundview school, and as a result she was always asked to return. She was given free leeway in dealing with problem students, but

she really had few problems. She kept them so busy making fun things and good grades that they were well behaved. Programs were excellerated there also to cover more in less time. She only had two students who got into serious trouble, but she just called their parents and got results. Griffith lives today in the same house in Meade that she lived in then.

Building and Supplies

Moundview school was built in 1907 and was used as a school until 1958. It was governed as school district 81 in Meade county Kansas and located eight miles east of Meade on highway 61 then two miles south on a county road. The building was constructed of wood with a concrete foundation and steps. Near the school was a coal house for the heating stove which was the responsibility of the teacher. On cold winter days, a gentleman who lived near the school would come in early to start the fire in the stove so the building was warm when the teacher arrived. After the building had electricity, this concern was eliminated because an electric furnace was installed in place of the coal burning stove. Other improvements included electric lights to replace the coal oil lamps, and a telephone installed later. Before the telephone was installed, the teacher would have to send a runner to a nearby farm house to use the telephone. The electric water pump allowed for indoor plumbing. The outside restrooms were supposed to be replaced by indoor plumbing, but a problem with the septic system allowed their use only when the weather was

harsh. The outside restrooms were said to be always clean and sanitized.

When Griffith started teaching at Moundview there was no hot lunch program as are mandated today in the public schools. The children brought their own lunches, usually in a brown paper bag. The lunches consist of a peanut butter or honey and butter sandwich with some type of fruit for the students enjoyment. During the last years at Moundview, the board installed a kitchenette in the school to allow for hot lunches for the students during severe winter months. However, the installation of the kitchenette did not bring the installation of a lunchroom staff. Each student would bring something to contribute to the pot luck lunch. Griffith and several of the older girls would prepare either beans or some kind of hot soup for the lunch. The other children would also help with the preparation of the lunch. They would be in charge of setting the tables for the meal. Griffith said she prepared hot soup more than any other meal because that was her favorite.

The appearance of the building was neat and well kept. Inside, were white and light green plastered walls and a platform or stage in the front of the classroom. The students always wanted her desk on the platform, but she felt that the lighting was better on the side of the room near the windows and therefore, a better location for her desk. The ceiling was constructed of ornate three foot square tiles that were outlined by wood trim. The front of the school had a large blackboard for the teacher and

students use. There was also a reciting bench that allowed a place for students to read their books out loud to Griffith. Many of the students did not like the bench at first because it made them nervous to read in front of the whole class. Griffith said the more the students read from the bench the more they enjoyed it. On the side walls of the classroom there were also several bulletin boards that displayed work and important ideas. The walls were also adorned with beautiful pictures including the Mona Lisa. An American flag hung in the front of the room along with a portrait of George Washington. When the school closed she was allowed to keep two of her favorite pictures.

The color of the painted walls was mist green in 1950 according to the first week report to the county superintendent. The report asked for a wide variety of information on the condition of the building and its contents. The generic report asks the teacher to complete every detail and underline the words that apply to the condition of her specific building including the foundation. From the report we know that the grounds were surrounded by a cable three wire fence. There was a cement walk that led from the building to the well for the purpose of carrying in the cooler for drinking. Cups were available for the students instead of the traditional long handled dipper. The well had been tested and the outside toilets were in good repair. The playground did have swings, a basketball, a volleyball, a softball, and a football, but did not have a

teeter, merry-go-round, or giant stride. The natural light entered the building from the north and south and the students faced east and west. There were two cloak rooms with adequate hooks for the number of students enrolled. A dinner pail held the students lunches, and a cupboard held supplies. The heat came from the Allen brand heatrola. The ceiling and woodwork was white. Educational equipment available for the teacher included word cards, phrase cards, scissors, paste, construction paper, colored chalk, word builders, and combination cards. To wash the students used a basin and liquid soap and dried their hands with paper towels. The teacher had a thermometer to check a student's temperature.

On another page of the report the teacher documented twenty seven single desks, a teachers desk and chair, and a globe. There was a piano, fire extinguisher, first aid kit, and a waste basket. Needs identified on this list included a primary table and six chairs, and a reading table. She also needed visitors' chairs, a large dictionary, and an up to date atlas. The world book was a 1928 model and the knowledge book was also printed in 1928. Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia was new with a 1950 copyright.

The custodial chores for the building were left up to the teacher. Griffith was in charge of keeping the inside of the school looking nice. Parents would volunteer to help when there was a program scheduled and they wanted the school to look just right. She had to sweep, dust all of

the room and clean the chalk board. Desk maintenance was also her responsibility. If a bolt fell out of a desk Griffith had to repair it. The desks were typical of many classrooms today. There was a formed sheet metal frame with a wooden hinged lid on top. The seats were attached to the desk top by a single leg that ran the length of the desk.

The outside of the building was white. Above the entrance hung a sign which read, District 81. On the roof of wood shingles stood a single chimney for the coal burning stove. There were large screened windows every two feet around the building with blinds inside that were usually pulled up to allow for better lighting. The siding was white lap board down to the foundation. A porch was attached to each end of the structure. Later, the back porch was converted to the toilet.

The grounds were sod but the students kept the ground bare through activity during the school season. This did create one less job for Griffith, mowing the school grounds. She did try to teach gardening but when the teacher left for the summer, the students did not care for the garden and flowers as needed. Overall, the building had no physical problems.

There were swings, a slippery slide, and a merry go round, two baseball diamonds, and a basketball goal. The teacher took turns playing with the groups, as the older students were playing on one diamond, and the younger students were playing on the other. Griffith said this was one of her fondest memories because she had played ball all through college

and felt like it gave everyone a lot of fun exercise.

The school building closed for two basic reasons. First, closing the rural schools was the prominent thing to do, and was happening all over the Midwest. Second, the enrollment had fallen steadily over the eight years of her tenure to seven or eight students in 1958. At that low enrollment level she agreed that they were wasting their money by keeping the school open. After all, the school was built to save the transportation of the large numbers of rural students to the town that were so far away. The building itself was sold to the highest bidder, and the equipment was divided between the towns of Fowler and Meade in Meade county. Plains, another town in the county did not receive any of the equipment from the school. No longer would parents hold pie suppers to raise money for field trips to the Hutchinson salt mines, nor would students take short trips to Jacob's Well. The students of the district would have to go to town.

CHAPTER III: BIOGRAPHY OF MILDRED GRIFFITH

Mrs. Griffith's family and experiences influenced her beliefs, values and what she taught her students. She was the daughter of Ed and Susie Jones. They farmed and raised cattle in the Mountain View Community area of Oklahoma. She was born on 29 March 1921. She fell ninth of twelve children, and is the only one of her immediate family to enter into education. As a child she attended the Pecan Rural School and the Sedan High School. After prep school she left home to attend Nazarene University in Bethany, Oklahoma where she majored in voice and piano and played on the women's baseball team. Her first teaching certificate is for public school music grades kindergarten through twelve. The requirements for teacher endorsement included practice teaching for one semester, and she directed the junior chorus at the Bethany First Church for one year. The rigorous four year training prepared her well for a career in music education and granted her the BFA degree. Though she loved children, her musical talent allowed her to travel the United States as a gospel singer. She did not decide to actually teach until she was twenty five years of age and married. The traveling requirement of the gospel singing group was not practical for a young bride. In 1948 she filled a vacancy in the Meade public school as the music and art teacher. Though fully certified, she returned to college every summer of those early years for further credit hours. To date she holds credit in over 200 courses. Her favorite practical course was methods and rules of elementary

education. She felt that this course over all others best prepared her to teach.

On 14 February 1948 she married Jack Griffith, in Carnegie, Oklahoma. They returned to make their home in Meade where she lives today. Together they had two daughters, Barbara and Bernadeane, who gave them five grandchildren. Even though Bernadeane prepared to become a teacher, today she is working in the medical profession as a doctor in Deacan Hospital in Nebraska. Barbara also in the medical profession trained to be a nurse. The oldest of the grandchildren is a dentist, and in April of 1997 their second grandson Chadd, will become a lawyer. All of the grandchildren have graduated from college. None of them are teachers but in her words, they all have good professional degrees.

Griffith's hobby, traveling abroad, is one of the reasons for her decision to retire from teaching in 1987. Her first excursions took her to Nova Scotia, and Victoria in Canada. She traveled to Brazil in South America, and later visited China, Australia and New Zealand. She has visited Europe many times to different countries. To date she has visited London and the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Austria. Her future aspirations include Isreal, and the dark continent of Africa. Even though she thought it was time to retire from full time teaching, she continued to work as a substitute teacher in the Meade school district until 1994 because she loved to teach.